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The 2 who must forge a compromise

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By Helen Dewar
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WASHINGTON — They are Capitol Hill's newest political odd couple: the outgoing, suave, self-confident black clergyman from Philadelphia and the intense, rumped and often-fretful son of an Italian-born grocer from Albuquerque.

Except for the shared misery they face as chief negotiators of a far-reaching, complicated and politically tricky budget deficit-reduction compromise, there is little to suggest a bond between the two — Rep. William H. Gray 3d (D., Pa.) and Sen. Pete V. Domenici (R., N.M.), chairmen of their respective chambers' budget committees.

Small-state Westerner, Republican and generally conservative, Domenici has headed the Senate's budget panel since the GOP took control of the chamber four years ago. He has carefully balanced the often-conflicting demands of the White House and his GOP colleagues.

Big-state Easterner, Democrat and as liberal as Domenici is conservative, Gray took over as head of the House budget panel a few months ago, earning high marks among Democratic colleagues for his fledgling efforts at consensus-building within the party.

In public, their only contact has been a bristling exchange in separate appearances before television cameras last month.

Shortly after Gray's committee approved its deficit-reduction plan, Domenici joined Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole (R., Kan.) in criticizing it as riddled with phony savings. Gray gleefully tweaked their noses in response, saying he was "disappointed my dear friends Pete and Bob would put on such a display."

'Compatible chemistry'

The exchange does not suggest a smooth start tomorrow for the House-Senate budget conference, heavily burdened by fundamental disputes over military spending, Social Security and new cuts in other domestic programs — disputes that could lock the White House and House Democratic leadership in mortal political combat.

And yet colleagues of the two chairmen say that one of the bright spots in the otherwise peril-ridden

negotiations is what one Senate source called their "compatible chemistry."

"Basically they're accommodating people who like working with other people, including each other," said Rep. Vic Fazio (D., Calif.), a House Budget Committee member who has watched both Gray and Domenici in action.

Moreover, they do not approach the deficit-reduction arena as strangers.

Two years ago, when House-Senate negotiations were near collapse in a bitter political dispute over post-recession spending on job programs, Gray and Domenici got together in a back room over a couple of beers and a pack of cigarettes and cut a mutually face-saving deal that broke the impasse.

With Democrats emboldened by the recession and their gains in the 1982 elections, the Democrat-controlled House was insisting on billions of dollars worth of anti-recession spending, while the Republican-controlled Senate, feeling pressure from the White House, opposed it with equal vehemence.

The Gray-Domenici deal was simple: an \$8.5 billion kitty to fund the programs if they were subsequently authorized. With the economic recovery taking the steam out of the Democrats' anti-recession drive, few of the programs were authorized and funded. But both houses had scored political points and, more important, a stalemate had been averted.

Powerful clients

With this background, several prospective conferees from both houses have suggested that Gray and Domenici could resolve their deficit-reduction disputes with relative ease if left to their own resources.

But each has powerful clients: for Domenici, the White House, and for Gray, the House's Democratic majority and leadership.

President Reagan, who agreed reluctantly to Pentagon-spending constraints in the Senate, is holding the line against further compromise, which will undoubtedly be demanded by the House. Dole and Domenici are echoing Reagan's line at least in public.

Similarly, House conferees can be expected to maintain their opposition to Senate-approved cutbacks in

Social Security cost-of-living adjustments.

If the Senate holds firm on defense and the House does the same on Social Security, the result will be far less deficit reduction than the \$56 billion for fiscal 1986 approved by each house. Moreover, there are nearly \$4 billion worth of differences between House and Senate spending levels for 22 social-welfare programs, including Medicaid, food stamps, child nutrition and low-income housing. And the Senate would terminate 13 programs while the House would end one: revenue sharing.

Nonetheless, House and Senate sources hold out hope for compromise, partly, they say, because of Gray as the new factor in the equation.

The budget aside, Congress continues its year-long struggle over the administration's Central America policy, as the House votes tomorrow on a plan to provide so-called nonlethal aid to the CIA-trained contras battling the Nicaraguan government.

The House rejected one such plan earlier. Many Democrats, however, want to be on record in favor of some type of aid, and approval of a revised proposal is given a good chance.

House GOP Leader Robert H. Michel will offer a \$27 million plan to provide "nonlethal" aid. There will be several Democratic alternatives, including one to cut the amount to \$14 million and direct much of the money to refugees.

By a 55-42 vote, the Senate approved a \$38 million aid plan Friday, which calls for spending \$14 million now and \$24 million later to provide nonlethal assistance to the rebels.

Sen. Christopher J. Dodd (D., Conn.) said yesterday on ABC's *This Week With David Brinkley* that terms of the measure enabled senators to tell pro-*contra* constituents that they voted for the money while telling opponents of deeper involvement that they opposed military aid.

Sen. Richard G. Lugar (R., Ind.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said on the same program that the measure was "a very straightforward bipartisan resolution to assist the contras."

The Associated Press also contributed to this article.